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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 000264

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [KDEM](#) [KMPI](#) [IZ](#) [YM](#) [ECON](#) [COM](#) [DEMOCRATIC](#) [REFORM](#)
SUBJECT: FM QIRBI TALKS ABOUT IRAQI ELECTIONS, MCC, AND
PRESS FREEDOMS

REF: SANAA 03 2863 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Thomas C. Krajewski for reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶11. (SBU) Summary. Ambassador discussed the Iraqi Elections, Yemen's MCC Threshold concept paper, and deterioration of Press Freedoms in Yemen. End Summary.

Iraqi Elections

¶12. (C) Qirbi called the Iraqi elections an important first step, commenting that "Yemen is in a position to welcome any democratic progress in the Arab World as part of reforms we started calling for in the region earlier than anyone else." Qirbi congratulated Iraqis for going to the polls, adding that he hoped those who lost the election would accept the results, but feared they will instead accuse the winners of rigging the elections. Unfortunately, said Qirbi, the Arab experience with democracy demonstrates that "losers are not very sporty." Ambassador responded that there is every indication the newly elected Parliament will include minorities in the task at hand -- drafting a new constitution.

¶13. (C) Ambassador suggested that Yemen could play an important role by being vocal in its support for the political process in Iraq, and by supporting Iraq in regional institutions such as the Organization of Islamic States and Arab League. Qirbi nodded, commenting that the best way for the USG to support unity in Iraq is by withdrawing coalition forces at the earliest opportunity. This, he said, would rally those who did not participate in the vote around the new government.

MCC Threshold: Improving the Investment Climate

¶14. (SBU) Ambassador congratulated Qirbi on the ROYG's submission of its Threshold concept paper to the Millennium Challenge Corporation. He commended the ROYG's focus on improving Yemen's investment climate, calling it an important step in the country's economic reform effort. Ambassador stressed the importance of upcoming ROYG decisions on key international tenders, particularly for management of the Aden Port. A lot of eyes are on this process, said Ambassador, underscoring the importance of conducting a transparent process resulting in an award to a company of international reputation.

¶15. (SBU) Qirbi agreed that improving the investment climate was the key to curing Yemen's economic ills. "We cannot," he said, "continue to rely on aid and donors indefinitely." Instead, the FM called for a comprehensive ROYG approach to attract foreign investors, taking into account all factors -- security, rule of law, and corruption.

Deteriorating Press Freedoms...

¶16. (C) Ambassador raised the recent deterioration of press freedoms in Yemen, sharing USG concerns with the FM over the number of arrests and prosecutions of journalists along with the closing of publications. Pointing out that Yemen until recently had a reputation for expanding press freedoms, Ambassador warned that Yemen's standing in the international community was at risk over these actions to limit expression.

"...Security Trumps Human Rights"

¶17. (C) "We, like you, feel uncomfortable about actions limiting speech," said Qirbi. Acknowledging the international community's increasing concern over cases like Khawani's (reftel). "However," he said, "the problem we face with outside observers is they look only at one side, our national security cannot be ignored." The Foreign Minister explained that Yemen is a tribal society with religious differences. Implying Khawani was imprisoned for supporting anti-American Shiite cleric al-Houthi, Qirbi said the

al-Houthi rebellion is an example of the challenges the ROYG faces. "If we are not firm in dealing with such groups -- the country's unity and survival would be jeopardized."

18. (C) The Foreign Minister suggested that "perhaps the judge in the Khaiwani case was a bit severe in his ruling," adding that he personally thought so. But, Qirbi continued, the case was handled according to the law. "You cannot fairly say the government mismanaged the case, insisted Qirbi. "We have to stand by our legal system." Qirbi said he preferred to focus on improving the law rather than on individual cases, pointing to ROYG efforts to work with the journalist's syndicate to reform the Press Law. (Note: President Saleh called for prohibiting the imprisonment of journalists publicly months before Khaiwani's arrest. End Note).

19. (C) Comment: Our MFA interlocutors have been forthcoming, making clear to Emboffs their discomfort with the imprisonment of Khaiwani and others, and insinuating that the ROYG is in a dilemma of its own making. "We have turned a mediocre editor into a Nelson Mandela, bemoaned Deputy FM Mustafa Noman on several occasions. With the release of the 2004 Human Rights Report's approaching, and Amnesty International calling for Khaiwani's release, the MFA is well aware that press freedom is likely to be a major issue in the near future. The drafting of a new Press Law that prohibits imprisonment of the media for expression, called for by Saleh months before Khaiwani's arrest, may indeed be in the works. In the compartmentalized and non-transparent ROYG bureaucracy, Post has been unable to find any evidence that the committee created to reform the Press Law has actually begun its work. According to members of the Yemen Press Syndicate, who described the new laws as a "big secret," they have not been allowed to participate in this process. End Comment.

Krajeski